

“Imagine a world in which human activity was not organized on the basis of ceaseless competition over artificially scarce resources, but the pursuit of the satisfaction of human needs... and you will understand a vision of the world that anarchists seek to create.”

**WTF IS
MUTUAL AID?**

**A BRIEF
ANARCHIST
INTRODUCTION**

Capitalism can inspire people to do many amazing things, as long as there is a profit to be made. But in the absence of a profit motive, there are many important tasks that it will not and cannot ever accomplish, from eradicating global poverty and preventable diseases, to removing toxic plastics from the oceans. In order to carry out these monumental tasks, we require a change in the ethos that connects us to one another, and to the world that sustains us. A shift away from capitalism... towards mutual aid.



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helped keep many alive and off the streets, where they inevitably would have been swept up by police and sent to the de facto poor person's housing provider: city jail.

In San Francisco, when people lose lovers to the AIDS crisis, neighborhood members formed a group called the Mary Widowers. This mutual aid group helps widowers cope with their losses, find new spaces for care, work, love, art, and fun. Mutual aid helps people survive.

Syringe exchange activist Donald Grove helped organize an underground syringe exchange program called Moving Equipment. "It was about creating a basis of mutual self support from which we could do this other stuff. And much of that support was born of an ethos of care among social outsiders. User organizing, people want it to be about political campaigns and stuff like that but what I see is that users are already organized in a hostile environment about just providing basic survival needs. To say that is not enough is to demand that everything and all political models act and look like the dominant political model. Sometimes self care is enough."

Anarchists work toward two general goals. First they want to dismantle oppressive, hierarchical institutions. Second, they want to replace those institutions with organic, horizontal, and cooperative versions based on autonomy, solidarity, voluntary association, mutual aid and direct action. Through mutual aid, anarchism takes shape as a practice in care, exchanging resources and solidarity, information, support, even comfort, care, and understanding. People give what they can and get what they need. When a group comes together to push for a change; when social outsiders come together to share or explore ideas and new ways of living, these are all forms of mutual aid.

Of course, mutual aid is obviously not a new idea, nor is it exclusive to anarchists. However, to understand this specific embrace of mutual aid, we need to go back over 100 years, to the writings of the famous Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin, who just so happened to also be an accomplished zoologist and evolutionary biologist.

Back in Kropotkin's day, the field of evolutionary biology was heavily dominated by the ideas of Social Darwinists such as Thomas H. Huxley. By ruthlessly applying Charles Darwin's

famous dictum “survival of the fittest” to human societies, Huxley and his peers had concluded that existing social hierarchies were the result of natural selection, or competition between free sovereign individuals, and were thus an important and inevitable factor in human evolution.

Not too surprisingly, these ideas were particularly popular among rich and politically powerful white men, as it offered them a pseudo-scientific justification for their privileged positions in society, in addition to providing a racist rationalization of the European colonization of Asia, Africa and the Americas. Kropotkin attacked this conventional wisdom, when in 1902 he published a book called *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, in which he proved that there was something beyond blind, individual competition at work in evolution.

It is a concept that is familiar to many anarchists, but often not fully understood. Mutual aid doesn't mean automatic solidarity with whoever asks for it, nor does it mean that anarchists have an obligation to enter into relationships with other oppositional forces. It is not a bartering system; it rejects the “tit-for-tat” psychology of modern capitalism while challenging the notion of communist distribution. It means to be able to give freely and take freely: from each according to her/his ability, to each according to her/his need. Mutual aid is only possible between and among equals

(which means among friends and trusted long-term allies). Solidarity, on the other hand (since it is offered to and asked for by ad hoc allies), needs to include the reality of reciprocation

Do you ever spend time thinking about where the food you eat, or the clothes you wear come from? What about the labour and materials that went into building your house, or your car? Left to fend for ourselves without the comforts of civilization, few among us would survive a week, let alone be able to produce a fraction of the myriad commodities we consume every day.

From the great pyramids commissioned by the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, to today's globe-spanning production and supply chains, the primary function of the ruling class has always been to organize human activity. And everywhere that they have done so, they have relied on coercion. Under capitalism, this activity is organized through either direct violence, or the internalized threat of starvation created by a system based on private ownership of wealth and property.

In an era of a dwindling welfare state with social safety net provisions crumbling, the importance of mutual aid and support networks could not be more important. The examples of such models are many. Clients at a syringe exchange share a place to stay. Such mutual aid networks